

Sometimes we all need a breath of fresh air

It's easy to take it for granted, says Jack Rear, but making the effort to really focus on how we inhale and exhale can work wonders

As the Cop26 climate change conference rumbles on in Glasgow, we're hearing plenty from world leaders all about the toxins, chemicals and allergens we're all breathing in. While there's no denying the import of such conversations, there's a quieter conversation to be had about the subject: not what we're breathing, but how.

At the start of 2021, the Global Wellness Summit declared breathing to be a trend of 2021. Yep, seriously.

It might sound ridiculous but a renewed focus on how we breathe might not be such a bad thing according to Dr Aimee Brame, a consultant physician at [London Bridge Hospital](#) who specialises in respiratory medicine.

"A lot of the people I see at the moment have a dysfunctional breathing disorder," she explains. "It's not a problem they have with the lungs or anything else; for various different reasons, people just breathe ineffectively."

Brame suspects that a lot of problems in our breathing have been unintended consequences of a certain respiratory illness that you may have heard about over the past year or so. And not necessarily just among those who caught the virus.

"Firstly, stress and anxiety levels in the population have been generally higher," says Brame. "But beyond that, people have spent time working in environments which are not suitable: kitchens, sofas, beds. They've ended up getting musculoskeletal problems because they're sitting in bad positions for breathing. What happens then is that you start to use all these unusual methods to try to maintain a comfortable breathing pattern, then your muscles learn to continue to do that."

"The trouble is that these muscles aren't supposed to do it so they get tired, and towards the end of the day when those muscles start to fatigue you'll get that sense of breathlessness because you've been over-relying on the wrong muscles to help you."

This is where concepts like wellness and mindfulness, which help you to refocus on breathing with your diaphragm or breathing more slowly can

be helpful.

Dr Danny Penman, author of *The Art Of Breathing* (HarperCollins), learned exactly how much the power of proper breathing is worth after a devastating paraglider crash in 2005.

"I was lying there, completely broken on the hillside, in the most unimaginable pain and I remembered a form of meditation I'd learned when I was in school: a simple breathing exercise. I'd heard that meditation could be used for pain control and, in desperation, I gave it a try and it worked. It felt as if the pain was separate from me. It was sufficient for me to keep things together while I phoned for the ambulance and to keep me going while I waited."

In the wake of his accident, Penman became fascinated by the power of breathing and began researching how mindfulness and breath control can be used to treat stress, anxiety and depression.

"The trouble with stress is that it feeds on itself," he explains. "If you tense up, that restricts your breathing. That might be really quite subtle, and you won't notice it unless you focus on it. But it makes breathing itself very slightly more difficult so the oxygen levels in your blood will decline very slightly, but what happens is that your body interprets the slight drop in oxygen and the still increasing carbon dioxide as stressful and it becomes a vicious circle making you more and more stressed."

In short, developing a bad posture from homeworking over the past 18 months may have led to inefficient breathing, causing stress, which makes your breathing even worse, creating more stress. And when your body associates the habit of breathing inefficiently with stress, you're more likely to fall back into those bad habits when you get stressed, which only compounds the problem.

'The trouble with stress is it feeds on itself. If you tense up, that restricts your breathing'

